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BOOK REVIEWS

DIANE PERSIN ECONOMAKIS

CREDIBILITY: HOW LEADERS GAIN AND LOSE IT, WHY PEOPLE DEMAND IT

*By J. M. Kouzes & B. Z. Posner
San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass (2011)
Hardcover, 250 pages*

*Reviewed by DIANE PERSIN
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To unpack the essence of credibility

is the main purpose of J. M. Kouzes and B. Z. Posner's book, *Credibility: How Leaders Gain and Lose It, Why People Demand It*. Published as an updated and revised version of their 1993 book, also titled *Credibility*, Kouzes and Posner expand on this most seminal attribute of successful leaders in what they call a "completely revised and slimmed-down version of the original" (p. xvii). They explain that, despite its shortened length, this updated edition places an additional emphasis on 21st-century technology and also has a companion workbook with exercises for strengthening credibility. However, they begin with the disappointing realization that, particularly within the last five years of economic turmoil, credibility has rapidly declined in various sectors of society: "Organized religion, Wall Street, Congress, business executives, the presidency, public schools, newspapers, banks, insurance companies, car salespeople, HMOs, and more have taken hits" (p. xii). This lack of trust in institutions and businesses has translated into a skepticism and distrust of individuals.

After exploring this credibility crisis, the authors pose a series of questions—what positive actions can leaders take to strengthen credibility over time? What can you do? What can anyone do? Kouzes and Posner begin to answer these questions by presenting one of their core ideas in the book—that leadership is the relationship between those who lead and those who choose to follow. The key to building a successful relationship is to create credible leaders who both trust their followers and are trusted by them. How to become a credible leader becomes the focus of much of the book.

In much the same way as their previous work, *The Leadership Challenge*, *Credibility* presents gaining

credibility among followers as a likely result of six “key disciplines”: discovering oneself, appreciating constituents, affirming shared values, developing capacity, serving a purpose, and sustaining hope. Using approachable language and a non-intimidating tone, Kouzes and Posner devote a chapter to each of these disciplines, providing a rich range of examples of successful leaders. They suggest that these six disciplines need not be regarded as attainable only to CEOs; rather, they can be achieved by anyone who understands and undertakes these important leadership lessons. Using a combination of quantitative research data gleaned from surveys and qualitative, more anecdotal evidence, they present a rich picture of how an aspiring leader may best earn the trust of his or her followers.

The recent emphasis on transformational or charismatic leadership suggests that leaders who appeal to their audience’s emotions can produce significant outcomes. However, many who discuss this form of leadership warn that such emotional responses may produce either positive or negative responses from followers. Consider Hughes, Ginnett, and Curphy’s (2009) cautionary inclusion of David Koresh, Adolf Hitler and Slobodan Milosevic as leaders who could also be considered to be charismatic, as well as admirable leaders such as Jesus Christ, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mohandas Gandhi (p. 628). Kouzes and Posner do not specifically address transformational or charismatic leadership in their book. This is perhaps surprising, since it may have offered an opportunity to present credibility as an ethos-driven form of leadership, instead of the pathos-driven leadership of transformational or charismatic leadership. However, they appear to provide a balance in their final chapter. Entitled

“The Struggle to Be Human,” it suggests that each of the six key disciplines may be corrupted into a negative attribute or vice if not used thoughtfully. For example, “developing capacity” may lead to vanity in a leader who may overestimate his or her own capacities, requiring humility as an “antidote” in these circumstances. In this sense, perhaps the authors remind us that, despite their clear recommendations and approachable tone, becoming a credible leader is a nuanced and complex process after all.

By holding themselves to the high standards of Kouzes and Posner’s six disciplines and working to uphold their “do what we say we will do” philosophy as a kind of daily goal to be met, Christian leaders today can present themselves as truly credible role models for their followers. Moreover, Kouzes and Posner challenge all people to thoughtfully discern credible leadership and to distinguish it from the misleading and manipulative messages that can often be found in the media today (particularly, it seems, in politics). Moving beyond *ad hominem* attacks on a speaker and instead engaging in more thoughtful dialogue about the substance of his or her message is one way in which we can regain the trust of others. In John 13:15, after Jesus washes His disciples’ feet, He says to them, “I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you” (NIV). With these words, He challenges all Christian leaders to act in a way that others can emulate. Herein is the truest definition of credibility.

Reference

Hughes, R. L., Ginnett, R. C., & Curphy, G. C. (2009). *Leadership: Enhancing the lessons of experience* (6th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

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